



VA

**U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs**

Veterans Policy Research Agenda

Office of Policy and Planning

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Introduction

The Office of Policy and Planning's (OPP) Veterans Policy Research Agenda (VPRA) is a list of research priorities for multidisciplinary research and analysis to help the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) achieve its strategic goals, as well as develop ideas and solutions for addressing issues affecting VA and the Veteran community. The VPRA is intended to accomplish the following goals:

- Produce and disseminate research to assist VA and its federal and NGO partners in improving service delivery and linking complementary programs that serve the Veteran community;
- Encourage and support research that looks at the broad spectrum of programs and services available to Veterans; and
- Foster more collaborative Veteran-centric research across federal agencies, academic institutions, and think tanks.

The VPRA will be reviewed on an annual basis and the outputs from the VPRA will help to inform strategic, tactical, and operational decisions with the ultimate goal of enhancing programs and services for Veterans. It will also better enable VA to improve Veterans' outcomes by effectively addressing current and future challenges and capitalizing on opportunities to better achieve our mission.

Background

VA is responsible for a timeless mission: *To fulfill President Lincoln's promise – "to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan" – by serving and honoring the men and women who are America's Veterans.* VA is built around three guiding principles: *people-centric, results-driven, and forward-looking.* These principles compel VA to consider new realities dictated, in part, by a changing population of Veterans, their needs, and expected outcomes. VA's strategic goals and objectives will guide the Department's efforts in this effort to improve services to the Veteran community:

Goal 1: Empower Veterans to Improve Their Well-being

Objective: *Improve Veteran Wellness and Economic Security*

Objective: *Increase Customer Satisfaction through Improvement in Benefits and Services Delivery Policies, Procedures, and Interfaces*

Goal 2: Enhance and Develop Trusted Partnerships

Objective: *Enhance VA's Partnership with DoD*

Objective: *Enhance VA's Partnerships with Federal, State, Private Sector, Academic Affiliates, and Non-Profit Organizations*

Objective: *Amplify Awareness of Services and Benefits Available to Veterans through Improved Communications and Outreach*

Goal 3: Manage and Improve VA Operations to Deliver Seamless Integrated Support

Objective: *Make VA a Place People Want to Serve*

Objective: *Evolve VA Information Technology Capabilities to Meet Emerging Customer Service / Empowerment Expectations of Both VA Customers and Employees*

Objective: *Build a Flexible and Scalable Infrastructure through Improved Organizational Design and Enhanced Capital Planning*

Objective: *Enhance Productivity and Improve the Efficiency of the Provision of Veteran Benefits and Services*

Objective: *Ensure Preparedness to Provide Services and Protect People and Assets Continuously and in Time of Crisis*

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Overview

The VPRA covers four priority research areas: Reintegration, Veterans' Families and Children, Public-Private Partnerships, and Veterans Benefits and Federal Disability Compensation. These research areas were identified as most relevant to priority Veterans' issues and, paired with potential research questions, are designed to encourage collaborative research on policy issues affecting the Veteran community.

Priority Research Areas

Reintegration

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) presented U.S. service members with unique – and in some cases entirely new – challenges, threats, and injuries. With over 1.5 million service members transitioning out of military service over the next five years, reintegrating these Veterans back into civilian life is a priority challenge facing our Nation's leaders and the American public.¹ However, reintegration crosses a broad spectrum of issues that includes environmental factors, such as employment opportunities, and capability-related concerns linked to mental and physical health issues. Diversity within the Veteran community adds further difficulty to Veteran reintegration. A number of Veteran groups face unique challenges in reintegration. Experiences with PTSD associated with military sexual trauma add to homeless women Veterans' employment challenges.² Rural Veterans often do not have easy access to VA infrastructure and institutional support.³ Disabled Veterans, in increasing numbers, suffer amplified impediments to reintegration as a result of the complexity and severities of disabilities.⁴ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) Veterans also possess unique health needs that originate from higher rates of exposure to traumatic events, suicidality, and substance abuse; and significantly influence reintegration outcomes.⁵

Reintegration Research Areas:

- Size and scope of the issue in addition to environmental barriers that may prevent or hinder Veterans' successful reintegration in society.
- Comprehensive model for evaluating Veteran reintegration across VA and partner organizations at the federal, state, and local levels.
- Specific issues facing Veteran groups, such as homeless women, rural, disabled, and LGBT Veterans during reintegration.

¹ "Veteran Reintegration: Useful Data." Joint Chiefs of Staff, Warrior and Family Support. Accessed January 1, 2014. http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/WarriorFamilySupport/Veteran_Reintegration_Useful_Data.pdf.

² Donna L. Washington, Elizabeth M. Yano, James McGuire, Vivian Hines, Martin Lee, and Lillian Gelberg. "Risk Factors For Homelessness Among Women Veterans." *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 2010, 82-91.

³ Szelwach, Celia Renteria, Jill Steinkogler, Ellen R. Badger, and Ria Muttukumaru. "Transitioning To the Civilian Workforce: Issues Impacting the Reentry of Rural Women Veterans." *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 2011, 83-112.

⁴ "Gulf War Era Veterans Report: Pre-9/11." 2011. Accessed August 26, 2014. http://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/GW_Pre911_report.pdf.

⁵ "The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People: Building a Foundation for Better Understanding." Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. March 1, 2011. Accessed August 26, 2014. <http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2011/The-Health-of-Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-and-Transgender-People.aspx>.

Research Questions:

1. What are the factors that determine a Veteran's successful reintegration in to society and how are they measured?
2. What are the unique risk factors for Veteran groups, such as women, LGBT, rural, and disabled Veterans during reintegration? What are some best practices and system approaches for addressing their needs and enhancing outcomes?
3. What can VA learn from reintegration programs, partnerships, and organizations currently supporting Veterans in other nations?

Veterans' Families and Children

Researchers and policy-makers recognize the importance of family participation in the rehabilitation and improvement of Veteran well-being in addition to the need for VA to incorporate the interests of Veterans' families and children into the development of benefits and services. Involvement of Veterans' families and children in VA benefits and services will increase as this recognition is operationalized. In recent years, Veteran benefits have expanded to include families and children of Veterans, such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill provision allowing Veterans to transfer educational benefits to spouses and dependents in addition to legislation expanding healthcare coverage to Veterans' families and children, who were stationed at Camp Lejeune.⁶ Moreover, VA recognizes the value of family participation in Veteran rehabilitation services, such as rehabilitation services for PTSD.⁷

Veterans' Families and Children Research Areas:

- With the expansion of certain benefits to Veterans' families, there is a need to look at how this would affect Veteran outcomes in addition to VA capabilities and strategy.

Research Questions:

1. How do Veteran's families and children enable successful reintegration and what are the effects on the Veteran?
2. To what extent do VA benefits and services extended to Veterans' families impact Veteran's outcomes?
3. What is the impact of changes in family structure on Veteran outcomes?

Public-Private Partnerships

VA defines a public-private partnership as a voluntary, collaborative, working relationship between VA and NGOs in which the goals, structures, governance, and roles and responsibilities are mutually determined to deliver the best possible services. VA partners with over 26,000 government and non-governmental organizations that help deliver the best possible services to our Nation's Veterans and their families, but also allow the Department to leverage existing expertise and adapt to evolving issues. Partnerships enable VA to quickly adapt to new and changing ways of doing business by incorporating

⁶ For more information: <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/camp-lejeune/>

⁷ Pietrzak, Robert H., Ilan Harpaz-Rotem, and Steven M. Southwick. "Cognitive-behavioral Coping Strategies Associated With Combat-related PTSD In Treatment-seeking OEF–OIF Veterans." *Psychiatry Research*, 2011, 251-58.

creative and innovative ideas from stakeholders focused on Veteran issues. VA partners also expand Veteran service capabilities in an effort to reach underserved Veterans in addition to Veteran families and children.

Public-Private Partnerships Research Areas:

- Insight into the design and management of public-private partnerships.

Research Questions:

1. What are best practices across federal space, private sector, and multi-lateral organizations for evaluating, prioritizing, and monitoring public-private partnerships?
2. What are best practices for defining and measuring partnership success and outcomes?
3. What are some creative and innovative platforms for enhancing communication to Veterans and their families and caregivers about VA partner services?

Veterans Benefits and Federal Disability Compensation

Veterans are presented with a wide-range of services that can be found at the federal, state, and community levels along with countless services from private initiatives outside of government programs. As a result, Veterans must navigate a complex system of benefits and services that is not always accessible. The proliferation of Veteran programs and services has added to the complexity of regulating, managing, and facilitating the improvement of Veteran well-being. On the 2013 High-Risk Report, the U.S. Government Accountability Office highlighted the need for modernizing the federal disability system as the current system relies on outdated methods of evaluation and does not take into account advances in medical treatment and technologies that have impacted the lives of the disabled community.⁸

Veterans Benefits and Federal Disability Compensation Research Areas:

- Interaction of Veteran programs and services within the system of Veterans benefits along with how the system interacts with Veterans.
- The extent to which VA disability policies are keeping pace with changes in society.

Research Questions:

1. What socio-demographic, economic, programmatic, and regulatory trends and characteristics of federal disability policies are most relevant to Veterans? To what extent are these policies keeping pace which changes in society that impact the Veteran community? How do other industrialized countries with similar labor markets and mature social protection systems evaluate disability policies and keep disability policies at pace with changes in society?
2. What is the extent to which minority Veterans utilize their Veteran benefits and what are the factors that influence their choices?
3. How have advancements in medical treatment and technology affected disabled Veterans' ability to become or remain economically self-sufficient?

⁸ "High-Risk Series: An Update." The Government Accountability Office. February 1, 2013. Accessed August 26, 2014. <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/652133.pdf>.

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